New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1946

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"Lysistrata"

PM

OCTOBER 20, 1946

—Kronenberger—

A Great Joke Falls Flat

PM Reviews

When the Gilbert Seldes version of *Lysistrata* was produced here some 15 years ago, it had its decided ups and downs, but was at moments very funny and in the main enjoyable. The same version, revived at the Belasco Thursday night with an all-Negro cast, added up to a different result. Despite a good deal of effort and activity on the stage, the evening seemed uncommonly tedious.

Aristophanes came up with a superb satiric idea in having women end a long war by refusing to sleep with their men so long as they persisted in fighting. But there is no use pretending that the play, despite its great idea and its lusty tone, is given enough development and variety to make it fully holding for modern audiences. There remains a great deal of slack that can only be taken up by the production. Anything, in a way, goes for *Lysistrata* in production, including the broadest slapstick; but it requires something robustly and pervadingly comic in spirit to bring it off, and that something never turned up on Thursday night.

Much of the trouble lay in Mr. Light's direction: he did not sharpen or vary things enough, point this scene up or play that scene down, or make one thing top another, as it must in farce. But some of the trouble lay in the fact that the performers, who are competent and engaging in their own fields, are few of them natural comedy actors, and fewer still, trained ones. Etta Moten, Rex Ingram, Fredi Washington, Mildred Smith and others get presence and personality into their parts, but never really get themselves into the play. The acting was exuberant but unmodulated; and as a result of the direction and acting alike, everything seemed much like everything else, and almost nothing seemed funny.

The production also suffered from introducing bits of music and dancing into the show: they were not only ineffective themselves, but they suggested a jazz treatment that should have been used throughout or not used at all.

—Louis Kronenberger.

'LYSISTRATA.'

LYSISTRATA, the Aristophanes play as adapted by Gilbert Seldes in two acts. Staged by James Light; scenery designed and lighted by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Rose Bogdanoff; choreography by Felicia Sorel; music by Harry Brant; revived with an all-Negro cast by Mr. Light and Max J. Jelin. At the Belasco Theatre.

Leader of Old Women's Chorus	Pearl Gaines
Lysistrata	Etta Moten
Kalonika	Fredi Washington
Myrrhina	Mildred Smith
Lampito	Mercedes Gilbert
Leader of Old Men's Chorus	Leigh Whipper
President of the Senate	Rex Ingram
Spartan Envoy	Maurice Ellis
Kinesias	Emmett Babe Wallace
Trygeus	John de Bettis
Nikias	Larry Williams
Polydorus	Sidney Poitier
Lykon	Emory S. Richardson

ACT I.—Daybreak on the Acropolis, Athens, 411 B. C. In the Twenty-first Year of the War Between Athens and Sparta. ACT II.—The Same. Late Afternoon, Five Days Later.

DAILY NEWS

OCTOBER 18, 1946

An Attempt Is Made to Revive 'Lysistrata,' but It Won't Breathe

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In my new but unsought capacity of Disinterment Editor—a task which has occupied a good many evenings this season—it is now my duty to report upon the exhumation of "Lysistrata," which took place last night at the Belasco Theatre.

In the field of practical criminology or its related art, the detective story, a body is dug up because somebody thinks it died an unwarranted death and believes a second examination may show a trace of rat poison or ant killer. In the realm of the theatre, as we are enjoying it at the moment, a remain is laid out upon a stage not out of suspicion but because of hope—a hope that it will look just as good as it used to in the old days when it was alive.

It rarely looks just as good, and "Lysistrata" doesn't. In 1930 Gilbert Seldes' treatment of an anti-war comedy by Aristophanes was impudent, saucy and sexy. In 1946 the same job is only feebly prurient. Of all the passing fancies, excitement is the passingest.

The best feature of the revival of "Lysistrata" is the setting by Ralph Alswang, which is a better than average realization of a good designer's wit and imagination. The acting, by a Negro company has moments of individual excellence, but for the greater part it is not acting at all, but recitation.

The "Lysistrata" company is headed by Etta Moten in the title role of a clever woman who discovers that men will come to any terms, even to stopping a war, if their wives will elude their embraces until the terms are met. The players include Mercedes Gilbert, Rex Ingram, Mildred Smith, Leigh Whipper and Fredi Washington.

The New York Times

OCTOBER 18, 1946

THE PLAY

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Without patient comparison with the accepted texts, it is impossible to tell just what relation the "Lysistrata" that was put on at the Belasco last evening has to the comedy Aristoplanes wrote. Lucid as the Gilbert Seldes modern version may be, it does not closely resemble the impeccable texts commonly available for a gentleman's library. But in the performance now being acted by a company of high-spirited Negro players, the basic idea is retained and clarified. They are playing "Lysistrata" with exuberance and impudence, economizing on nothing except subtlety.

* * *

As you probably know from previous rumpuses in this town, the basic idea is that the women of Greece, back in 411 B. C., force peace between the Athenians and Spartans by denying the men the rites of love. Without the consolations of love, the men capitulate within five days (that's the Greek timetable) and agree to make peace on any terms. Everyone has been agreeing for centuries that this is a sensible, not to say a horrifying, idea—proving the superior wisdom of women, the relative importance of war in the scheme of things and the Homeric humor of Aristophanes.

Since "Lysistrata" is a classic, or at any rate used to be, the bawdiness of the humor automatically becomes irreproachable. But perhaps an ordinary playgoer is permitted to observe that the current version is notably Minskyized. Some years ago a Moscow Art Theatre troupe played "Lysistrata" here before the foremost theatre of Russia had become politically enlightened. That version had a chaster way of communicating Aristophanes' bedroom message.

* * *

At the Belasco they could easily eliminate the tandem strip-tease between Myrrhina and Kinesias in the central part of the second act, and still no one would criticize the rest of the performance as prudish. They could also eliminate purely for entertainment value the diffuse choreographic number and its shrill music.

That would leave a good rough-and-ready "Lysistrata" acted by a company of gusty and humorous actors. As Lysistrata, the Goddess of Peace under duress, Etta Moten is very able indeed, interpreting female insurgency in a sound night-club style. Grave and imperious as she appears to be when she is leading the women to unnatural revolt, the tempo of swing keeps taking hold of her and conquering her awe for the classics.

Rex Ingram is also a superior actor. As the President of the Senate, he revives a scrambled performance by the physical vitality of his acting and by the mischievous gleam of humor that brightens his eyes. As the quavering leader of the old men, Leigh Whipper introduces one of the most genuinely amusing episodes in the performance by the contrast he draws between the spiritual valor and the physical incompetence of the ancients. As the rugged leader of the Spartan women, Mercedes Gilbert is likewise vastly entertaining.

* * *

The cast includes some especially ardent devotees of classical Greek romance — notably Fredi Washington and Mildred Smith. Attractively costumed in robes designed to harmonize with Aristophanes' basic idea, they raise the temperature of the play to a point that can be noticed and appreciated. Thanks.

Tell it not in Gath, but "Lysistrata" is not an overly inventive comedy. There are long stretches where the theme is monotonous. It is also doubtful whether Mr. Seldes, the literary cartoonist for the occasion, or James Light, the director, have relieved the monotony by the dances, the burlesque sketch of the war makers or the ribaldry under the Acropolis walls. The Negro "Lysistrata" could be much funnier if it were done wittily instead of in burlesque. But the project of "Lysistrata" with players from Harlem is sound in theory and for the most part sound in execution, like swinging the Fifth Symphony.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

OCTOBER 18, 1946

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Sex, Ponderous Sex

ONE of the bawdiest of all classics, "Lysistrata," is being given a ponderous revival at the Belasco. Although the Aristophanes comedy is being performed by a Negro company, it lacks even sustained exuberance. Where one might have reasonably expected a lusty blend of horse-play and innuendo, there is little more than a stagy and rather timorous interpretation of the burlesque on physical love and war. The Gilbert Seldes adaptation, seen here some years ago with Violet Kemble Cooper in the title role, would appear to be even less amusing than it seemed then. Only occasional moments of lusty humor enliven a dull and stumbling show.

* * *

The problem of presenting "Lysistrata" with propriety may have been solved in this James Light-Max J. Jelin production, but the basic one of making it entertaining has been completely bypassed. There are snatches of dialogue which might offend the prudish in a work which deals almost entirely with sex. Even these are glossed over at the Belasco, where they might have been made palatable in this tolerant modern day. Light's direction does not keep the piece from being even more of an academic stunt than it is inherently in the Seldes version.

There is scarcely need to remind one at this late date that "Lysistrata" celebrates the audacious scheme of an Athenian matron to end an interminable war with Sparta. She prevails on Grecian women to forsake their marriage couches until their husbands and lovers quit fighting and spend some time at home. The senators, who are waxing fat on the war, object. The soldiers are understandably perturbed. The women win, hands down. With incisive embellishments, the comedy still has bounce. Little of it is communicated in the current show.

* * *

Etta Moten plays "Lysistrata" with a strange mixture of hortatory posturing and hip-weaving. At least her delivery is clear and her presence commanding. Rex Ingram is imposing as the president of the senate and Leigh Whipper contributes a conventional caricature of an old man. To Mildred Smith and Emmett Babe Wallace goes the task of demonstrating what happened to one couple during the strike of the wives. Their horseplay is neither sly nor very dramatic. "Lysistrata" never succeeds in being mildly shocking. It rarely is any fun at all.

The Sun

OCTOBER 18, 1946

'Lysistrata,' Revived at the Belasco, Is Now Tedious, and It's Clumsily Staged.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

The presentation of the ribald, bawdy, 2,315-year-old farce, "Lysistrata," submitted last evening at the Belasco, picks up somewhat in its second half, but it is still far from being a satisfactory show. Something has happened since the play was done here in 1930—something that is definitely not to its advantage.

Perhaps the production at the Belasco is to be blamed largely for last night's listlessness. The all-Negro cast gets surprisingly little gayety into the proceedings. The direction isn't good and neither is the lighting, and you greatly miss the Norman Bel Geddes scenery that did so much for the "Lysistrata" of sixteen years ago.

Such leading players of their race as Etta Moten, Rex Ingram, Leigh Whipper and Fredi Washington are now engaged in this strangely subdued retelling of the story of the revolt of Grecian women, weary of the Peloponnesian war, who go on a sex strike, deserting their husbands' beds until hostilities come to an end. It's hardly any news by now that the wives win their strike.

When the "Lysistrata" of Aristophanes was done hereabouts in 1930—the Gilbert Seldes version was used then, as it is now—it all seemed a romp and a lark, a gross and rampant farce, something that was gusty and lusty and a lot of fun. And such people as Miriam Hopkins, Hortense Alden, Sydney Greenstreet and Ernest Truex had a great time playing it. But things go stale in the new version. James Light's direction doesn't help much. The scant merriment that comes along in the second act is not enough to save the play.

Etta Moten plays the title role, leading the Athenian women in their love strike, but I prefer her in "Porgy and Bess." Rex Ingram is the burly President of the Senate, but I'll take him in "St. Louis Woman." Fredi Washington and Mildred Smith get some spirit into the roles of Kalonika and Myrrhina and Emmett Babe Wallace is fairly funny as a lustful, overwrought warrior returning from the field of battle to find himself denied his marital rights. Sidney Poitier has a few comical utterances as the sex-starved Polydorus. Leigh Whipper prances about as the leader of the Old Men's Chorus. He has had better parts—and better luck with them.

"Lysistrata" has worn somewhat since 1930. Perhaps the notion of abstinence from love on the part of the Athenians and the Spartans isn't as funny as it used to be. But the old play has had much better treatment than it now receives at the Belasco. Instead of being a frolic, it is now a rather declamatory and heavy-handed satire. Also, a tedious show, clumsily staged.

New York World-Telegram

OCTOBER 18, 1946

'Lysistrata' in Hepcat Tempo

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The new "Lysistrata" is a hepcat's dream of Aristophanes. If its attitude were more defined it might make a wild gay evening. As it stands, you get the feeling that any producer watching these Negro players audition the Greek comedy would immediately suggest making a jazz musical of the whole bawdy affair.

The humor of Gilbert Seldes' version of the play is broad enough. If you are going to point it up with eye-rolling and hip-jiggling, you might as well go whole hog and Mae West the entire production.

The program quotes Mr. Seldes as saying "Lysistrata" is "like a burlesque show." This does not mean that it can be played with a leer here and dead pan dignity there. The result is flashes of humor spaced with dull stretches. It needs more consistent style.

An Effective Pacifist.

The plot of "Lysistrata" is too well known to recount in detail. Suffice it to say that the lady of the title is one of the few effective pacifists in history. Tired of a 20-year war, she gathers her Athenian women and the wives of their enemies. Under pressure they swear to be continent until their husbands make peace.

After a good deal of strain on everybody's part, the girls hold out until peace is made.

Etta Moten makes a commanding Lysistrata. She has a resonant voice and an authoritative carriage.

Can't Make a Go of It.

Outstanding among the minxes she tries to control are Fredi Washington and Mildred Smith. Miss Washington, well known from earlier shows and pictures, gives a humorous tension to Kalonika, who tried every dodge to get out of the Acropolis and finally could not quite make a go of her oath.

Miss Smith is a dainty wide-eyed Myrrhina, who from the visible evidence was the bravest of the girls.

Rex Ingram, as President of the Senate, resembles a frustrated bulldozer in a scarlet cape, as he rages at the rebellious women.

Emmett Babe Wallace looks a solid soldier as Myrrhina's agonized husband, and Sidney Poitier gets laughs as the bachelor brave with a yen for Kalonika.

Leigh Whipper is the ringleader of the lecherous old men, and there has seldom been a more startling figure brought on the stage than that appearing as Lysistrata's child.

Ralph Alswang has provided a set for the show of tilting ramps like mad checkerboards that climb wildly up the sky to a temple.

This show may at various moments remind you of Gypsy Rose Lee et al., of a play by the congregation at a strawberry festival, of Weber and Fields, of a stag dinner and of a dance contest in the Garden.

The truth is, it is never relentless fun until it turns into a wall scaling Lindy Hop in the finale.

New York Post

OCTOBER 18, 1946

Aristophanes and Mr. Seldes Consider War and Sex

By Richard Watts Jr.

According to Gilbert Seldes, who is his official interpreter in these parts, Aristophanes' classic comedy about the peace movement in ancient Athens is "like a burlesque show with a book by a modern satirist." Such a description is preferable to the earnest fiction that "Lysistrata," after all of these centuries, continues to be revived because it is such a biting anti-war satire, and Mr. Seldes is to be commended for proudly proclaiming that what he calls "the strip-tease-in-reverse" of the plot is more than merely the by-product of its propaganda. The melancholy thing is that, from whatever point of view you look at it, the historic old play just isn't very funny these days.

When the Seldes version of "Lysistrata" was first done here some fifteen years ago, it was not only a great critical and popular success but had the good financial luck to shock quite a number of people. My recollection is that some of the white actors in the earlier production did add a certain furtive vulgarity to their work that is happily absent from the current Negro version, but, anyway, no one is likely to be upset by it today. On the other hand, there is considerable doubt that many will be convulsed by it, either.

Women and War

I wouldn't insult you by suggesting you might be unaware that "Lysistrata" tells how the women of Athens, Sparta, Corinth and vicinity, after some bullying on the part of the heroine, stop a war by refusing to live with their warrior husbands while the fighting is going on. I merely bring up the matter of the familiar plot in order to add my suspicion that, since the old play is based on one joke, it tends to grow pretty wearying in reasonably short order. It is true that people have found "Lysistrata" funny enough to keep reviving it after an impressive number of centuries, but it certainly didn't seem hilarious at the Belasco Theatre last night.

The implication would appear to be that the fault lies with the production and acting, but I am inclined to doubt it. Certainly the staging is lively enough and the playing is forthright and attractive. In particular, there is a spirited and engaging performance by a charming young actress named Mildred Smith as an unwilling striker against love, while Rex Ingram, Leigh Whipper, Fredi Washington and Etta Motten are also helpful—even if Miss Motten, in the title role, does slide into a few moments which suggest that she has an ambition to do imitations of Mae West.

Mr. Seldes' Fault?

It can hardly be Mr. Seldes' fault, either, since this version of his assuredly pleased the paying guests when they flocked to it in the earlier production. The only explanation I can hit upon is the discomforting one that the success of "Lysistrata" in the early thirties was due more to what was then regarded as its scandalous appeal than to any particular hilarity it continues to hold for modern audiences.

For many years the persistent Mr. George Jean Nathan has been suggesting to producers in need of a script that they try a free adaptation of the Aristophanes comedy made by the French playwright, Maurice Donnay. I must confess that I have never read or seen the Donnay version, but, despite my respect for Mr. Seldes, I think it might have been a better idea for these interesting Negro players to have tried the French version, provided they simply had to do "Lysistrata."

Journal-American

OCTOBER 18, 1946

'Lysistrata' Opens At Belasco Theatre

By ROBERT GARLAND

On paper, this "Lysistrata" must have looked like a grand idea. On stage, at the Belasco, it does not. With a competent cast of Negro players, on an arty acropolis by Ralph Alswang, in colorful costumes by Rose Bogdanoff, with devious dances by Felicia Sorel, against handmade music by Henry Brant, under deliberate direction by James Light, the grand idea goes wrong.

I cannot say just why. When somebody first mentioned an all-Negro duplication of the Gilbert Seldes transcription of the Aristophanes strip-tease, it sounded as if inspired. Why, I wondered, had not the combination been brought about before? If the colored folk can do what they are doing with Anna Lucasa, what could not they do with "Lysistrata"!

Last night, in 44th st., what they could not do was plenty. With such well-known names, such well-tempered talents, as those of Rex Ingram and Etta Moten, Leigh Whipper and Fredi Washington, Mildred Smith and Mercedes Gilbert, you would not believe the Seldes-Aristophanes collaboration could fall flat. But fall flat it does, right on its double entendre.

Sex, at the Belasco, is made actually uninteresting!

• • •

Girl Wants Boy

It is forever sex o'clock on Ralph Alswang's arty acropolis. Thanks, I would not be surprised, to the intent of the director, the yen is not only mightier than the sword. It is mightier than anything else in this Seldes-Aristophanes resuscitation. Girl has boy. Girl loses boy. Girl wants boy again. That, alone, is the persisting theme of the Negro "Lysistrata."

It should not be. No matter in what color the piece is played, there is more to it than meets the sexy eye. Written by the Bernard Shaw of ancient Athens, it concerns itself with right and wrong, war and peace, honor and dishonor, health and sickness, and, as the current comeback too well knows, men, women, and, to quote Broadway's Annie Oakley, their doing what comes naturally.

Because of the fine fusion of its subject matters, Aristophanes' comic, tragic and ageless bequest to all posterity should be as alive and as stimulating today as it must have been that first-night in Athens, nearly two and a half millenniums ago. But, at the Belasco, it is not. And, again, I cannot say just why. Not with Olympian certainty.

Much of the blame, however, can be laid on the director.

• • •

Play Wants Pace

Admitting that it is always sex o'clock in the "Lysistrata" James Light has directed, there is no reason why the yen should be so heavy-footed in its setto with the sword. Most Negro performances and performers stand up and get a move on. But not the playing and the players I have now in mind. Quite definitely do they dawdle, accenting love's ardor all the while.

Thus it comes about that the Seldes-Aristophanes "Lysistrata" is an interminable time passing its given point. Surely, with a less lackadaisical setter-of-the-pace, such well-known names, with such well tempered talents, as those of Mr. Ingram and Miss Moten, Mr. Whipper and Miss Washington, Miss Smith and Miss Gilbert, would be more effectively displayed.

So, more in disappointment than in sorrow, I am obliged to report that this latest Broadway revival is no little of a bore, a windy night on the acropolis where sex raises and re-raises its repetitious head. Frankly, I wish they had combined Wednesday night's "Loco" with last night's "Lysistrata," calling them "Locostrata" and getting them both out of the way at the same time.

"Locostrata" might well have been a better show than either.

"Loco"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

OCTOBER 17, 1946

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Blame It on the Moon

A POMPOUS peccadillo is excuse for the new farce at the Biltmore. It supplies "Loco" with a series of stock situations, opportunities for mildly exaggerated characterizations and a great deal of simulated gaiety. That most of the laughter is confined to the stage is less the fault of the players than the playwrights. Dale Eunson and Katherine Albert have articulated their comic conceit so that it looks for all the world like a play, but the shifting scenes contain a modicum of entertainment. Even with Jed Harris's slick direction, it is a ho-hum show.

• • •

The idea for the offering is said to have been plucked from a Eunson short story, which may be the reason why "Loco" was ever written at all. It involves a stuffy middle-aged financier with a Conover model in his first steps along the primrose path, carries them through an attack of measles in a Maine lodge and, to the considerable amazement of all concerned, including a first-night audience, has the abortive amour bring sweetness and light into several lives. Developed with delicacy and eclat, it might have stood up under the bright lights of a theater. As it is, the piece is little more than garishly trivial.

• • •

The acting is sometimes refreshing enough to go it without sustained comic invention. Jean Parker, forsaking Hollywood for her Broadway debut, gives an earthy and likable portrayal of the party girl who amply deserves the nickname of the title. Even when she is asked to mouth some dull and familiar malapropisms, she gives the role a lusty assurance. Her tangles with a girl friend in a powder room, or with the staid married man in the lodge which she had expected to be a sort of Elks' convention have the flovar of comic cartoons. Unfortunately they have the same dimensions.

• • •

Jay Fassett, back in the theater from his Idaho ranch at Harris's insistence, is first-rate as the eventually happy fall guy in an extra-marital escapade. His bleak austerity contrasts nicely with Miss Parker's flambouyant bounce. Parker Fennelly tries to make trite gags funny as a Maine woods handyman and Beverly Bayne flutters properly as the unsuspecting wife. With Harris's smart production "Loco" lacks almost nothing but good writing to make it an engaging farce. That is a considerable lack.

'LOCO.'

Play by Dale Eunson and Katherine Albert; staged by Jed Harris; settings by Donald Oenslager; costumes by Emiline C. Roche; presented by Jed Harris at the Biltmore Theater Wednesday evening, October 16, 1946. The cast:

Alma Brewster	Helen Murdoch
Naomi Brewster	Beverly Bayne
McIntyre	Beverly Kelley
Waldo Brewster	Jay Fassett
David Skinner	Morgan Wallace
Loco Dempsey	Jean Parker
Ginger	Marlo Dwyer
Matron	Darin Jennings
Eben	Parker Fennelly
Pamela Brewster	Elaine Stritch
Nicky Martinez	Al Vario
Miss White	Lauretta Maxine

SYNOPSIS: The action takes place within a period of two days in February of this year. ACT I. Scene 1, Brewster's library. Scene 2, The Golden Bantam. Scene 3, Powder Room of the Golden Bantam. Scene 4, Brewster's bedroom. Scene 5, Brewster's hunting lodge in Maine.

The Sun

OCTOBER 17, 1946

'Loco,' Skimpy and Unoffending Comedy, Done at Biltmore by Jed Harris.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

Nobody revived anything at the Biltmore last night. Nobody went back a couple of centuries for the evening's entertainment. The comedy called "Loco" is a brand new one, and I wish it were a better one. Jed Harris, who has known his days of magic in the New York theater, brings it forth in 47th street.

Dale Eunson and Katherine Albert are the authors of "Loco." In their skimpy and unoffending comedy they write about a big Wall Street man (married), who is vexed by the strain of his everyday routine and who is in need of a fling. He has it by taking a pretty model (Conover) to his hunting lodge in Maine, and there she comes down with measles.

Grumblingly, the Wall Streeter takes over the role of nurse and before they're done with the Maine woods, they get pretty fond of each other. And before she walks out of his life she puts him straight on a few of his domestic problems. It's all just as simple as that.

"Loco" is played in two acts and nine scenes, with the backgrounds imaginatively designed by Donald Oenslager. The play has a few mildly amusing interludes, but it is too loose and too straggling. The authors haven't been particularly skillful with their situations or their dialogue.

Jean Parker, from out of the films, plays Loco, the gentle golddigger. Miss Parker is rather refreshing and succeeds in making something of a character of the little redhead who isn't the brainiest kid in the world but who has a definite wisdom of her very own.

Jay Fassett, coaxed back to Broadway from his Idaho ranch, is the man of big business from downtown. He plays him and underplays him laconically, testily, gruffily, and with generally good results. Parker Fennelly turns in a conventional portrayal of a rural cab driver. Morgan Wallace gets some humor into the role of the friend who prescribes girls and a night club whirl as a cure for Waldo Brewster's boredom. Elaine Stritch is attractive as the tycoon's spirited daughter.

"Loco" is on the mild side. It is meager theatrical fare. I wonder why Jed Harris bothered.

DAILY NEWS

OCTOBER 17, 1946

'Loco' About a Model's Measles; The Play Is Spottier Than She Is

By JOHN CHAPMAN

I drove a locoed horse once named Bill on a road gang. He had a teammate who was all right, but Bill was a problem. I'd say "Giddap" and the other horse would start pulling the go-devil, but Bill would just stand there. It took ten seconds for the "giddap" to trickle through his brain. After ten seconds Bill would start pulling, too. Once he got going he pulled pretty good, but his delayed takes made the work very uneven.

And that, my dear children, is last night's bedtime story, which is about a play titled "Loco," by Dale Eunson and Katherine Albert, which Jed Harris presented at the Biltmore Theatre. Once in a while "Loco" pulled pretty good—but a long time after the audience had said "Giddap."

The nice features of this comedy are Jean Parker and Jay Fassett—she as a dumb broad not unlike the girl in "Born Yesterday" and he as a dead-panned financier who is bent upon committing a peccadillo if it kills him. Mr. Fassett can throw away even a bad comedy line so skillfully that it sounds good, and Miss Parker, a Hollywoodian richly upholstered—one hopes—by Nature, gives a likeable performance in the old role of a tomato with a heart of gold.

The story is all about a model nicknamed Loco who goes with this old goof to his hunting lodge in Maine, but all that happens there is that she gets measles and he feels kindlier toward his lawful family. The story moves haltingly through numerous Donald Oenslager settings, and some of the other characters gave me the horrors.

The players include Beverly Bayne as Mr. Fassett's fluttery wife, Parker Fennelly as the inevitable Maine character, Marlo Dwyer as another tomato and Elaine Stritch as a sylphlike but nevertheless expectant mother.

The New York Times

OCTOBER 17, 1946

Footnote to the Stage

By BROOKS ATKINSON

If any unkind remarks have appeared in this column on any subject this week, they are hereby revoked. For "Loco," which appeared at the Biltmore last evening, makes its immediate predecessors look like masterpieces. It is an intangible comedy on the hackneyed theme of a tired business man who is restored to his unappetizing family by a trollop with a heart of gold. Incompetently written, large sections of it seem like a prolonged non sequitur.

Boris Aronson, the sibylline scene designer, accounts for a good many of the stage's mistakes by the perverse habit directors have for "playing against" the obvious mood. If the play is a tragedy, the smart directors decide to play it for comedy, according to Mr. Aronson. "If it is fantasy, they play it for realism," he says. "If it is realism, they give it a fantastic accent." There are times in "Loco" when both the authors and the director seem to be "playing against" the theatre in general, as if no script had been written and no organized performance put on the stage.

In this case Jed Harris is producer and director. He is celebrated among other things for his productions of "Broadway," "Uncle Vanya" and "Our Town"; and presumably he saw something in "Loco" worth staging. Jean Parker is making her Broadway debut in it; and, if the program notes are, as usual, absolutely reliable, Jay Fassett, who is a Harvard graduate, has abandoned a ranch in Idaho to play one of the leading roles. Among the others who are wrestling with the mirage is Beverly Bayne, loved by all moviegoers in the days before the screen began to make noises. Donald Oenslager, princely designer, has given the production an elegant appearance.

But none of these talents can make "Loco" look like a comedy. And don't start making puns out of that title, please.

PM

OCTOBER 18, 1946

—*Kronenberger*

Thin-Cut Bread And No Butter

PM Reviews

Loco is a flimsy, plot-famished little comedy that Jed Harris has sweated to direct to the hilt, quite forgetting that it has no blade.

The nicknack concerns a sober-sided middle-aged Wall Streeter who, fed up with his family, bounces off to his hunting lodge in Maine with a bauble-minded Conover model called Loco. There the young lady promptly comes down with measles, and for ten days everything remains as innocent as a pillow fight. Lorelei Lee, in fact, turns out to be a blend of Miss Fixit and Mary Pickford, sending pop back to the old homestead a kinder father, smarter husband and happier man.

Loco has a few mildly amusing moments, but the plot would fit on a postage stamp, turning as it rapidly does into one static, tediously over-extended situation. And as a possible comedy of character—of a dull dog doing his first straying with a gay chick—*Loco* goes to hell once the chick turns into somebody who is definitely going to Heaven. The play walks out, in other words, on its realistic premise, turning into standard tosh handled with sub-standard talent.

The brightest thing in Loco is Jean Parker, a Broadway newcomer from Hollywood with attractive looks, a very likeable personality and the ability to make what can be made of the model's role. Jay Fassett is skilfully dull—just what I suppose he's meant to be—as the businessman; and there is a nice minor performance by Morgan Wallace. —LOUIS KRONENBERGER

Journal-American

OCTOBER 17, 1946

'Loco' Makes Bow At the Biltmore

By ROBERT GARLAND

Take, if you have a mind to, the format of Elmer Rice's "Dream Girl," but without Jo Mielziner's co-operative scenery. Add, if you have nothing else to offer, the Billie Dawn of Garson Kanin's "Born Yesterday," but without Judy Holliday's superior stupidity. Season, if there's something in it for you, with the big shops of the Telephone Company's "Classified Directory," but without the Red Book's singleness of purpose. Mix, and mold into a play.

And then what have you? Well, you have a workable idea of the Dale Eunson-Katherine Albert "Loco," the "new comedy" Jed Harris has put up at the Biltmore, with settings by Donald Oenslager, costumes by Emeline Roche, perfumes by Prince Matchabelli, hair-styles by Charles of the Ritz, flowers by John Feilippelli, deodorizing air purifiers by the Credo Company. And production by Mr. Harris, who used to know a good play when he picked one.

"Loco" is no good play. But it does have its brighter and better moments, even if these brighter and better moments are a long time coming round. And, when they do come round, they have nothing much to do with the context of the comedy. As the fumbling story moves from the wealthy Waldo Brewster's library to bedroom, hunting lodge to office, taking in a night-club and a powder-room on the way, the brighter moments tarnish, the better moments fade . . .

Oh where, Jed Harris, are your shows of yesteryear?

* * *

Measly Condition

As I was about to tell you, Waldo Brewster, he of the library, the bedroom, the hunting lodge, the office and the millions, has a wife who doesn't understand him. And a daughter who doesn't understand him. And a son-in-law who doesn't even bother. So, to make up for these several misconceptions, he runs off with a lady known as Loco, a model model and more Powers to her! And, out of the simplicity of her heart, she doesn't understand him, either.

At first she doesn't. Beside a table at the Golden Bantam, then in the night club's powder room, our Loco mistakes our Waldo for a fireman on a flier, a salesman on a spree, a buyer on a binge, an apple-knocker come with fruit to town. It is not until the two are marooned illegally in Maine that our Loco knows our Waldo for the real right-guy he is. Then, it is too late. For she, not knowing what she does, finds herself with measles.

While in this measly condition, our Waldo takes our Loco paternally in hand. He cooks for her and scrubs for her. He registers her temperature and feels her pulse. He carries her from bed to chair and back to bed again. And when the sandman soon is due, he reads out loud to her from the pages of "The Sheik." A father could treat a daughter no more circumspectly, while she, in turn, restores him to his family, better far than new . . .

And where, Jed Harris, is that revival of "Broadway?"

* * *

No Weed, Loco.

Returning to "Loco," let me hang my head and tell you that the players are not too far above their play. An exception to this too-sweeping statement is Jean Parker, who, according to my program, is (and I quote) vacationing from the coal pits of Hollywood where she was developing something of a B-complex, being saved by B-heroes from B-cliffs in B-pictures (unquote). At the Biltmore, Jean remains in B-surroundings. But her Loco is no weed.

Playgoers interested in the Hollywooden art of underplaying are urged to get themselves a load of Jay Fassett underplaying Waldo Brewster. He would be wonderful in the title role of "Harvey." Beverly Bayne, to show that she knows different, overplays Naomi, the wife who misunderstands her Waldo. Barry Kelley is amusing as a mysteriously un-butler-like butler who, after nine scenes of servile spoofing, turns out to be—a butler!

The others behave as Mr. Harris tells them, although Marie Dwyer occasionally strikes out on her own as the shady lady known as Ginger. Why not? Turning once more to my program, I see that shady ladies have been her on-stage specialty ever since she was 15. Why not, indeed? So, today, if anyone should ask you, the good news from Broadway is that Jean Parker, in her maiden tilt with acting in the round, comes off with most of "Loco's" honors . . .

But where, Jed Harris, did you get that play?

New York Post

OCTOBER 17, 1946

A Very Mild Little Comedy Offered by Jed Harris

By Richard Watts Jr.

Since the chances are that the average relationship between a beautiful Conover model and a stuffy business man is not particularly stimulating to the outsider, perhaps "Loco" can be described as a realistic play. The apparently Platonic affair, which is recounted by Dale Eunson and Katherine Albert in their new comedy, is complicated by the measles and the completely unjust suspicion that the young lady is contemplating blackmail, but such minor plot devices fail to give it any more excitement on the stage than it must have had in the business man's snowbound Maine lodge.

"Loco" is probably one of those unfortunate plays that seem more promising in the script than ever materializes in the theatre. Mr. Eunson and Miss Albert have an intelligent sense of humor and they have devised some lines and thought up a couple of incidental ideas that do brighten the proceedings from time to time. The character of the model rather resembles a poor man's Judy Holliday, and that certainly does not make it exactly unsatisfactory for a comedy.

Too Much Realism

The trouble is that the whole adventure is such a frantically uneventful one, and the comedy suffers from what turns out to be the excessive realism of the playwrights. The stuffy business man is an extremely dull fellow, and he is made a dull fellow in the theatre. The model is given to endless and pointless chatter, and so she chatters endlessly and pointlessly on the stage. The week spent in the hunting lodge was not very interesting to the participants, and it is made to seem not very interesting to the audience. The expedition to Maine comes to a peaceful conclusion for the two main characters, and it assuredly does for the spectators, too.

Even the idea in "Loco" that most amused me has a highly specialized appeal to a definite age group in the audience, and it is likely to fall flat for those outside of it. When the business man is looking through the dusty library in his lodge for a book to read to the model as she recuperates from the measles, what he comes across are novels called "The Inside of the Cup" and "Queed," and if you happen to recall them from their best-seller days and haven't given them much thought since, you are likely to be amused by the memories aroused. Otherwise you will wonder what on earth the scene is about.

Even when the host finally does find something for the girl and it proves to be the rather more modern book called "The Sheik" the stubborn sense of realism possessed by the author floors them again. Whether what he reads from is actually "The Sheik" I am in no position to tell, but it is so believably dull that you credit it thoroughly when the young woman falls asleep after a couple of paragraphs.

Red Herring

While speculating on "Loco," I must pause to wonder about the character of a comic butler, played by Barry Kelley. A gentleman of pugilistic tendencies, this butler is built up so much in the first scene that, if the play had turned out to be a murder mystery, you would have known he was intended as a red herring in the case. That is apparently what he is in "Loco," since nothing much comes of him after the one scene.

In the title role, Jean Parker, of the movies, looks the part of the Conover model pleasantly, and her performance is fresh and likeable, although she has some early moments when it appears that, just before going into rehearsal, she had been scared by the aforementioned Miss Holliday. As the business man, Jay Fassett is so realistic that, in the manner of the play, he seems a little dull. The supporting players include such veterans of other art forms as Beverly Bayne, who was a famous early film star, and Parker Fennelly, who is the great Fred Allen's Titus Moody on the radio.

Mr. Harris has produced "Loco" painstakingly and Donald Oenslager has provided his customary good sets, but that curse of realism has made it a dull comedy.

New York World-Telegram

OCTOBER 17, 1946

Jean Parker Plays Lead in a Mild Comedy

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The title of last night's opener, "Loco," has to do with the fashion of photographic models calling themselves by cute nicknames.

It is a mild little comedy about a model with a heart of gold. Loco would not turn down a cluster of diamonds, but she does not want to cause anybody any trouble.

She is amazed at the quick play she gets from Waldo, who invites her for a week end the first time they meet. But Waldo is unhappy

Daughter Marries Gigolo.

His wife is about as restful as a squirrel around the house. Something always disturbs the routine he wants. Besides his chronic grouches, he is furious with his daughter for marrying a dancer—gigolo to him—and has disinherited her.

He takes Loco to his lodge in Maine, where she immediately breaks out with measles. In the 10 days of her illness he learns enough about her to find that her standards are pretty genuine and her outlook pretty smart.

Following her tips he straightens out his own life. And it is Loco who chooses to take herself permanently out of his picture.

This makes a complaisant story that stretches thinly over the length of a play. The single situation sighs for sparkling dialogue which it does not get. In fact it is very rarely funny.

Jean Parker Miss Pale Hands.

Jean Parker, lately a film star, makes her Broadway debut as Loco. She has the face and figure for the girl who was elected "Miss Pale Hands of 1946." And she shows some amusing comedy sense, as in the powder room scene which has the most concentrated humor of the play.

Miss Parker has not the resources to carry as long a part as this, particularly when so many lines ask an actress to instill in them a laugh that is not there. She is inclined to mug and use repetitious gestures to cover weak spots.

Her autobiographical speech must be nearly as long as James Barton's in "The Iceman Cometh," and she goes through it valiantly with no particular invention. Nor does it deserve any.

Jay Fassett as the straying tycoon makes Waldo a mild fellow more human than dramatic under the circumstances. He is mellow and settled, then more confused than ruffled as his escapade proves a frost.

Morgan Wallace gives some pleasant comic touches to the role of Waldo's sophisticated friend who inspires the fling.

Beverly Bayne plays Waldo's wife with the nervous gesticulation of a volley-ball team's captain. This is probably as good a way as any to play that kind of part.

Unfair to Leading Lady.

Parker Fennelly is dry in a typical Down East character role, and Mario Dwyer is boisterous as an equally typical girl on the town.

Elaine Stritch laughs a lot as Waldo's daughter, and her dancer husband gets a natural and intelligent reading from Si Vario.

Looking back it seems unfair to ask a leading lady to play a long scene in a sleeping mask so her lines are continually directed to empty spaces on the stage. Just as unfair as it does to ask an audience to laugh at it over and over.

A good guess would be that what audiences there are for "Loco" will be comprised of models (in dark glasses and raincoats and alone at matinees), and gentlemen verging on middle age (pretending they had no idea what the play was about).

"The Duchess of Malfi"

New York World-Telegram

OCTOBER 16, 1946

Bergner Stars in Revival of Elizabethan Horror Play

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Duchess of Malfi" lived up to her direst advance reports. Now she can go back to the library where she is undoubtedly more peaceful than on the stage of the Barrymore.

This 17th century play of John Webster's is considered by students of the period to have a certain amount of poetic imagination. Little of it was noticed in an all too frequently unintelligible performance last night.

Nor was there much evidence of the fiery fury that should attend such goings on. It would take a much grander presentation than this, if any, to make the play interesting even as historical documentary theater.

"The Duchess of Malfi" tells of the unhappy fate of a young woman of the House of Aragon who married a steward in her household. She kept the marriage a secret for six years, but in the process gained herself a loose reputation because of the children she continued to bear.

A House of Horrors.

Her two brothers are lower than the names they call her. The Cardinal wants her fortune, and the Duke has already displayed a mad jealousy of her. Together they put their sister through a 16th century house of horrors.

They banish her, excommunicate her, and murder her husband and son. They bring her back for the delight of delivering the two bodies to her in a cabinet.

They then lock her in a madhouse for a while before strangling her and her lady-in-waiting. In talking all this over afterward, the brothers lose faith in each other. And in company with their own villainous spy, the three manage to kill each other.

Bergner in Rôle of Duchess.

Elisabeth Bergner fares better than most of the cast as the Duchess. The role is the only one in the play with variety, but even her interpretation could hardly be called impeccable.

She is charmingly coquettish at first, in spite of liberal Dessarte gestures. Tricks come into play in the scene where the spy deliberately causes her to lose a baby by feeding her poisoned apricots. But the sequence is one of the best in the play as it moves from sprightly gaiety to horror.

Miss Bergner is at her best in her restrained playing of her last scene. Here she evokes real pity.

Canada Lee makes a formidable enough spy for the brothers. He reads his lines clearly and simply, and gives the character malicious enjoyment until overtaken by disgust.

Carradine the Cardinal.

As the two brothers, neither John Carradine nor Donald Eccles is greatly successful. Carradine's Cardinal is never very sly or ominous, nor does he project any of the grand manner one might expect of him.

Eccles makes a frenzied hawk of the Duke, but in emotional speeches whole phrases are lost in the excitement.

Patricia Calvert lends the play a certain style throughout as the lady-in-waiting, and is really moving in her death scene. Whitfield Connor is dignified and natural as the unexciting commoner the Duchess marries.

The physical production is undistinguished except for some lovely costumes for Miss Bergner. The music is, to say the least, percussive.

Despite the good intentions behind such a revival, and its cunningly bawdy tongue, only a scholar could wish the bones of this unhappy family disinterred.

'The Duchess of Malfi'

A revival of the John Webster play adapted by W. H. Auden starring Elisabeth Bergner and featuring John Carradine, Donald Eccles and Canada Lee was presented last night at the Ethel Barrymore by Paul Czinner. It was directed by George Rylands with incidental music by Benjamin Britten arranged by Ignatz Siasfogel. Scenery was by Harry Bennett and the costumes by Miles White.

THE CAST

Ferdinand	Donald Eccles
The Cardinal	John Carradine
Giovanna, Duchess of Malfi	Elisabeth Bergner
Antonio Bologna	Whitfield Connor
Delio	Richard Newton
Daniel De Bosola	Canada Lee
Officers Attending on the Duchess: Ben Morse, Michael Bey, Lawrence Ryle, Robin Morse.	
Ladies Attending on the Duchess: Beth Holland, Diana Kemble.	
Cariola	Patricia Calvert
Old Lady	Michelette Burani
Roderigo	Rupert Pole
First Guard	William Layton
Second Guard	Frederic Downs
Julia	Sonia Sorel
Monk	Michael Ellis
Pilgrim	Jack Cook
Antonio's Son	Maurice Cavell
Antonio's Daughter	Kathleen Mozan
Madmen: Priest, Walter Peterson; lawyer, Robert Pike; Astrologer, Frederic Downs; Doctor, Guy Spaull.	

DAILY NEWS

OCTOBER 16, 1946

'Duchess of Malfi' a Slow, Long And Unimportant Theatre Relic

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Add to this season of theatrical disinterments—some of which have been quite lifelike but others of which look indeed like stiffs—"The Duchess of Malfi." This one is a sedate and fusty Seventeenth Century melodrama which Elisabeth Bergner and her husband, Paul Czinner, brought to the Ethel Barrymore Theatre last night.

The novelty of "The Duchess" is admitted, for historians say it has never before been played on Broadway. After a rather long evening of it, I have an idea that all the generations of actors and managers who could have presented it and didn't had the right idea, or lack of idea. Even John Webster's Elizabethan prose, brushed up by the poet W. H. Auden, can make the drama no more than a solemn curio in this time.

There are sundry minor novelties in this first production, like the appearance of Canada Lee, a very good Negro actor, in a remarkable whiteface makeup, and like the presence of Hollywood's lean and hungry profile, John Carradine, in the role of a lustful cardinal. I found some interest, indeed, in Miss Bergner's performance, for, although she still nurtures a Joe Weber accent, she has abandoned her accustomed wriggles and gestures and plays a tragic role with pious restraint.

The Troubles She's Seen.

The Duchess of Malfi is indeed a woman put-upon; the tribulations of Little Orphan Annie, even, are as nothing to hers. The sister of a lunatic duke and of the aforementioned cardinal, she is a young and happy widow who would like to wed again. But her brothers will not permit it, so she seizes the young man with whom she is in love and entices him into a marriage by mutual consent—meaning that he says he'll have her and she says she'll have him, and that's the wedding.

It's a happy marriage for six years because the loony brother is away somewhere being somebody's prisoner. This brother has left a spy behind in the person of Mr. Lee. Crafty and heartless though he is, Mr. Lee can't find out who it is who is presenting the duchess with all her babies in all these six years.

Corpses All Over.

But the brother finds out when he returns from captivity and troubles mount. Husband and children are killed. The Duchess is imprisoned and an attempt is made to drive her mad by surrounding her with frightful lunatics. When she won't crack she is strangled with great ceremony right on the stage.

Nor is this all. The unbalanced brother stabs the cardinal; then he and the spy fight, dealing each other mortal wounds, and by 11:20 P. M. practically everybody of importance is dead.

John Webster is Elizabethan but he isn't Shakespeare, and his drama is but a feeble relative of the soaring tragedies of the bard. Nor can the acting make of the play more than it is—another curio for the curious. Miles White's costumes and Harry Bennett's settings are in the period, and there is some very incidental music by Benjamin Britten.

New York Post

OCTOBER 16, 1946

Villainy Not Very Exciting In 'Duchess of Malfi'

By Richard Watts Jr.

That celebrated early seventeenth century horror play, John Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi," has always been highly regarded by the pedants and pundits of English dramatic literature. The lyric Mr. Swinburne, I am told, even placed its author next to Shakespeare as a playwright. On the basis of the performance given last night by Elisabeth Bergner and her associates in an adaptation of the old tragedy made by the famous W. H. Auden, the evidence suggests that the work has been considerably overrated. In rebuttal, however, it can be said that it wasn't really given a chance.

Essentially, "The Duchess of Malfi" is a violent study in malignancy. Although handsomely equipped with such paraphernalia of modern Hollywood horror as strangling, knife thrusts, bodies falling out of cabinets, innocent heroines cruelly persecuted, screaming madmen and scoundrels dying by each other's hands, the playwright's chief instrument for creating terror was characterization. In the heroine's two brothers and their bloody-minded agent, Webster invented three monsters of evil that were hatred and cruelty personified and set them down in a world of murky malevolence that befitted them.

Universe of Monsters

In contrast there was the spotless and beautiful heroine, as complete in her virtue as her brothers were in their balefulness, alone and unprotected—for her lover certainly was no help to her—in a universe of monsters. Then murder, lust, sadism and a touch of incest were piled upon each other until the resulting structure could either be a veritable cathedral of horrors, physical and psychological, or topple over into something very close to burlesque. It was all up to the actors and the production.

If the Webster melodrama is to be given a chance with a modern audience, a mood and spirit, as artificial in their different way as in an Oscar Wilde comedy, must be captured and maintained. An atmosphere of haunting, implacable, malignant evil must be established, in which the horrors of diseased brutality and melodramatic villainy seem natural and menacing, or the schemes of that wicked trio, the Cardinal, the Duke and their henchman, have a way of being dull and a little silly.

That is how they seemed last night. Neither in acting nor production did the play have its chance to exert its spell or seem the least bit frightening or moving. A lot of very wicked things were done, innocence was badly treated and a number of people came to violent ends but Miss Bergner and friends couldn't make it mean anything.

Miss Bergner

As the representative of goodness and virtue Miss Bergner exerted all of her celebrated technique, but without her customary guile. She tended to be excessively cute at times, but I am afraid that she never managed to be a forlorn and touching victim with the slightest degree of credibility.

There was the tour-de-force of Canada Lee in white-face, playing the villainous henchman, but, although Mr. Lee was supposed to be one of dramatic history's greatest personifications of wickedness, he always seemed a pleasant fellow playing at evil. It always appeared likely that he would step in and rescue the heroine.

Then there was John Carradine, the movie villain, playing the faithless Cardinal and making very little impression at it. The only actor who struck me as having anything of the right note in his malice was Donald Eccles, who portrayed the Duke with some show of effectiveness. But "The Duchess of Malfi" in Mr. Auden's not-too-helpful adaptation seemed tedious terror.

Journal American

OCTOBER 16, 1946

'Duchess of Malfi' At the Barrymore

By ROBERT GARLAND

I know a man who knows a man who has read "The Duchess of Malfi" from start to finish. This far-away fellow, a cultured chap who has to do with taxicabs in Brooklyn, admires John Webster's sere-and-mellow drama very much indeed. So much does this friend of a friend of mine admire it that, waiting on Flatbush ave. out where the I. R. T. begins, he frequently dips into it for rest and relaxation.

The far-away fellow who is familiar with John Webster's 16th Century grotesque is of the private opinion, publically expressed, that "The Duchess of Malfi" is terrible but touching a play that, to quote his revered John Gassner, "piles terror upon terror and attains sublimity in defiance of all rules of good taste, a timeless nightmare in which human beings are writhing grubs in darkness."

Well, with this friend of a friend of mine in view, I went last night to the Barrymore with head and hopes held high. Here, I reminded myself, is a terrible but touching play, an ancient and honorable hair-raiser in process of its first professional American production, a melodramatic classic which Charles Lamb, Rupert Brooke and Max Neuberg of Flatbush and Nostrand ave. have recommended.

Here is one more mettlesome revival to bring incense to the feet of good dead dramatists and blushes to the cheek of playwrights who remain alive and shirking, so I said to me.

• • •

Down, Not Out

Well, let me tell you that, at the Barrymore, "The Duchess of Malfi" is nothing of the kind. Under the sponsorship of Paul Czinner, in an adaptation W. H. Auden, with direction by George Rylands, John Webster's sere-and-mellow drama is one of the longest evenings I have ever spent on Broadway. And, as if it were not long enough without it, an echo has been added to make the playtime longer. That echo gets me down!

Down, yes. Out, never. From that echo on I sit in my seat persistently, following, as best I can, the confused and generally uninteresting story of the female of title, her husband of the dukedom, her boy-friend of the household and her gentleman of the horse. He, Daniel de Bosola, also is the villain who pursues her from pillow to post, from act to act, unceasingly.

This Daniel de Bosola refuses to take "no" for an answer. Although I'm not quite certain why his duchess is more sinned against than usual, I am quite certain that she is. Upstairs in the parlor of the palace, downstairs in the grotto of Our Lady, outside on the level in a lunatic asylum, Danny drives the duchess deep into disaster. Finally, "Ha! my tomb!" says she.

Frankly, no one could find pleasure in "The Duchess of Malfi" as Paul Czinner and his hired help revive it in 47th st. Not even Mr. Neuberg!

• • •

Lee Takes Malfi

With the exception of Canada Lee in white-face, getting even with Al Jolson, John Webster's "timeless nightmare" is badly acted. Elisabeth Bergner, as the noblewoman who gives the piece its title, is for the most part ineffective. And, to come right out and say so, unintelligible. In neither "Escape Me Never" nor "The Two Mrs. Carrolls" was her accent half so interfering. The Duchess just isn't La Bergner's arsenic.

John Carradine, relaxing after 200 motion pictures, makes his Broadway debut as the conniving Cardinal. Frank Fay would not approve of him as I do. Donald Eccles as Ferdinand, the bull in the Bergner china shop, knows all the words and gestures. So do Whitfield Connor and Richard Newton as steward of the household and friend of the steward of the household, respectively. And the merry, merry madmen!

But, as has been hinted, it is Canada Lee in white-face—and I mean just what I say, in white-face—who gives "The Duchess of Malfi" such vim, vigor and vitality as it manages to achieve in its first professional showing in these United States. His makeup is something for the record. As for Harry Bennett's settings and Miles White's costumes they have little more to offer than Ignaz Strasfogel's music...

I must tell the man who knows the man who admires John Webster's current classic to urge Max Neuberg to think twice before repairing the Barrymore. There, "The Duchess of Malfi" has waited 338 years for reinstatement. As far as I'm concerned, it should have stood in the anthologies a couple of centuries longer.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

OCTOBER 16, 1946

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Next Week 'East Lynne'

EVEN the research student is likely to find "The Duchess of Malfi" a preposterous bore. Vaguely resuscitated on the stage of the Ethel Barrymore Theater, the John Webster melodrama makes a cogent plea for being left in the library. Aside from its purely academic interest and occasional acting flourishes, the new revival in what is rapidly becoming a season of revivals is baffling and embarrassing. It is something of a mystery why it should have been produced at all outside a campus. The participation of several knowing actors in its grand guignol extravagances calls for more sympathy than applause.

Elizabethan blood and thunder nonsense has been generously served in this Paul Czinner production. The sponsor's wife, Elizabeth Bergner, wrestles with the title role, endowing it with dignity and a certain elusive pity. John Carradine of the movies stalks through seductions, assasinations, garrottings and mad scenes with sinister malevolence in his cardinal's robes. Donald Eccles makes the duchess's incestuous brother a particularly loathesome co-villian, while the Negro actor, Canada Lee, puts on white-face to play the role of evil's henchmen. The latter stunt, incidentally, is little more successful than the exhibit itself.

For all these substantial donations of the current theater the play itself remains an ill-kempt and ludicrous fright show. W. N. Auden, in his adaptation, has tried to underline the poetry, but it rarely reminds one that the original was written in the time of Shakespeare. The physical production is about as threadbare as the work itself and the off-stage noises are downright funny except in the scene in which an echo taunts the duchess's secret husband with his imminent decease. George Rylands's direction is as jerky as the action and the incidental music does little to relieve a remarkably sustained tedium.

Miss Bergner alone gives a quality of dramatic compulsion to archaic nonsense. Her versatility is a bit unrestrained in the supposedly gay opening stanzas in which she woos and weds her steward and discloses her pregnancy by eating green apricots. When faced with a dead husband and son pitching out of a cupboard, gibbering madmen or her executioners, she has a poise and presence which sometimes belies the clanking contriving of the plot. The pedagogues may give Dr. Czinner a nod of approval for his project and Miss Bergner does not suffer unduly as th estar, but "The Duchess of Malfi" is dull and unpalatable diversion.

The New York Times

OCTOBER 16, 1946

THE PLAY

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Out of the clutter of Elizabethan playbooks they have pounced upon John Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi," and Elisabeth Bergner acted it at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre last evening. It was written in 1613, one year after Shakespeare left London to seek retirement in Stratford; and it is said that some of Shakespeare's actors played in it. Although it lacks the welkin ring of Shakespearean ideas, it is a tale of blood and pity told in a familiar Elizabethan fashion that might be described as Shakespeare without the magnificence.

Since the minor Elizabethan dramas are freely talked about and seldom performed, students of the theatre should be grateful for a chance to see what Webster looks like on the stage. In the performance staged by George Rylands, he looks tamer than one could wish. For this is a conventional production that moves at a tepid pace, breaks into many scenes, once renders the whole drama false by addressing the audience through a voice amplifier and grows squeamish when the good duchess finally gets strangled.

Votaries of horror naturally expect to have their scalps split wide open when that cruel and barbaric scene comes along. But at the Barrymore the apostle of death discreetly stands between the audience and the victim and the duchess goes to her death with less confusion than when a man heroically gives up a tooth in the dentist's chair. No, that death is tragically refined. Perhaps Henry Condell, co-editor of the First Folio, would have approved of it, but Richard Burbage would have thrown in his part indignantly.

The current revival serves at least to remind us again that we have some almighty good actors available today. Everyone knows that Miss Bergner is a very fine actress, indeed, with incandescence and also a rare sense of spontaneity. Here she adds an affecting development of character that gathers strength as it grows out of the beguiling opening scenes into the decision and nobility of the conclusion. W. H. Auden has revised the script to keep the duchess as the central figure straight on to the conclusion. But it still leaves the duchess as a weak figure among brutish men, and limits Miss Bergner's radiance to individual scenes.

* * *

People who are familiar with Canada Lee's recent performances are no doubt prepared for the marked development in his acting. But this playgoer, who has not seen him for four years, can only express delight over the way in which a good elemental actor has acquired mastery of the stage. Here he is playing in white face; and, as a matter of fact, inside his make-up he counterfeits a white man about as successfully as a white man in burnt cork counterfeits a Negro—which is hardly at all. But that is only an amusing detail by comparison with the intelligence, ease and scope of Mr. Lee's acting as Bosola.

John Carradine is excellent as the iniquitous Cardinal. His voice and speech are pleasant and articulate; and his portrait of character is complete. As Antonio, the ill-fated husband of the Duchess, Whitfield Connor is giving an altogether exceptional performance. Apart from his personal charm, which is considerable, he acts the part with definition and lucidity, and has mastered the Elizabethan line. As the fanatical brother Ferdinand, Donald Eccles gives hardly more than a surface sketch of an overwrought figure. He is personally overwrought; he does not sufficiently act it.

This performance, and also the scenery by Parry Bennett, are reported to follow closely John Gielgud's production of "The Duchess of Malfi" in London. But the performance here is too genteel for an Elizabethan horror show.

PM

OCTOBER 17, 1946

—Kronenberger—

Still Plagued By Misfortune

PM Reviews

The way some of my colleagues laced into *The Duchess of Malfi*, you'd imagine it aspersed the honor of their womenfolk. They made it sound much less like a classic than like a crime; or at least as though the two words were synonymous. It is not for me to dispute how awful an evening my confreres had, but I have a feeling that rather worse plays have come off with lighter drubbings.

I myself, as it happens, am come as much to bury the Duchess as to praise her. I suggest an evening with her at the Barrymore—and then only with grave reservations—to no one who has not spent gratifying evenings with her in his library. This is no play to meet for the first time in 47th Street. There is too much amiss with Webster's tragedy judged as a stage-piece, and even more amiss with the current production.

But we are still dealing with a very noble—however uneven and amorphous—piece of writing. A great *play* it may well not be, for the villanies it hatches, the horrors it piles up, never quite induce that sense of cavernous terror that must mainly justify them. The terror is too much a matter of moments, as the play is of interludes. Webster had no Shakespeare's dramatic genius for dense fusion, for steady mounting; his stairs have far too many landings, he can only give you scenes. Nor had Webster Shakespeare's capacity to humanize: there is something of the crypt about *The Duchess*. But at its best it is dramatic and poetic both; and I doubt whether one needs to be a pundit to feel the high voltage, the fierce shock, of the poetry.

* * *

But in the theater Wednesday night, this story of the widowed, warmblooded young Duchess of Amalfi who secretly remarries against her brothers' wishes and is slowly done to death by them, had too little power. The horrors sprung of the one brother's grasping nature and the other's fanatical emotions, piled up much as horrors do in a thriller, and without the thrills, while the stage strewn with corpses at the end seemed no resting-place for any Elizabethan world of bloodshed and turmoil. The production chiefly flagged because it lacked pace; but it chiefly failed because it lacked atmosphere. Yet, after the first act, it was often possible to feel let down without being bored. There were things to wait for and catch at, and moments when something was caught.

Miss Bergner comes off the best of the performers. In fact, after some undue coyness at the start that suggested the play might better be called *The Archduchess of Malfi*, she was often impressive, with much of the force and dignity of the woman who could say, in the thick of her misfortune, *I am Duchess of Mafi still*. As her husband, Whitfield Connor played simply and likeably. As Bosola, the villainous spy of the piece, Canada Lee enacted a white role in white-face with surface energy and competence, though no depth. John Carradine plays one of the wicked brothers in a sort of Walter Hampden fashion, and Donald Eccles, the other brother in a style of rant, sibilance and grimace. There is no over-all style whatever. Mr. Auden's cuts seem judicious though, as it turns out, insufficient.

—Louis Kronenberger

The Sun

OCTOBER 16, 1946

'The Duchess of Malfi,' a Gory Melodrama, Is Slow-footed and Ponderous.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

"The Duchess of Malfi," a gory old melodrama, brings treachery, violence, lust and murder to the stage of the Barrymore, but it's slow-footed and ponderous in its march to the killings. Elisabeth Bergner plays the title role, a Negro actor puts on a white make-up, and Paul Czinner puts on the play.

The Barrymore's new piece is versified costume drama of the seventeenth century chill-and-shudder school, the work of John Webster, and the text now used is the adaptation by W. H. Auden. There's the stuff of a roaring thriller in the bloody goings-on against Italian backgrounds. But the preliminaries are on the listless side, the performances are not too good, and an audience, in waiting for the general slaughter, suffers along with the unhappy Duchess.

That Duchess, a young widow, brings on all the trouble by her marriage to the good-looking steward of her household. Three children are born to this union. Her hellish brothers, one a Duke and the other a Cardinal, plotting to get her fortune, have forbidden her marrying and have engaged the sly De Bosola to spy upon her. When they learn the truth the murders begin and the brothers themselves are corpses before the ghastly business is ended.

"The Duchess of Malfi," directed by George Rylands, gets going somewhat in its final scenes, providing some gruesome moments, such as those in which the bodies of the Duchess's husband and her young son tumble from a cabinet before her eyes, and in which she is tortured by dancing monsters of death just before she is strangled and placed gently in a nearby coffin.

Miss Bergner plays the Duchess in her tricky, mannered, emotional and occasionally inaudible fashion. She is an actress of posture—and of a certain power. John Carradine is sonorous as the evil Cardinal, and Donald Eccles slinking and sinister, and also somewhat hammy, as the Duke of Calabria, given to incestuous as well as to murderous inclinations. Whitfield Connor is quite believable as the unfortunate husband and Patricia Calvert, providing one of the high moments of the play, creates a feeling of genuine terror as she realizes her time is at hand.

An odd and interesting bit of casting places Canada Lee in a white man's role. In appearance he presents a rather comical figure, although his lot is one of tragedy. His extraordinary make-up consists of flesh-colored grease paint, a thick wig, bushy eyebrows, a goatee and a putty nose. He wears a high collar and gloves. He gets into the part of De Bosola as he goes along and is at his best when he reveals himself as being quick sick of the fiendish job that he took over.

Elisabeth Bergner is an actress who gets a lot of service from inferior plays. She doesn't demand masterpieces. She hasn't one in "The Duchess of Malfi." It's a macabre costume melodrama quite too slow in getting down to the business of the evening, which is murder. The scenery for this new and expensive production was designed by Harry Bennett and the costumes by Miles White.

"Lady Windermere's Fan"

The Sun

OCTOBER 15, 1946

'Lady Windermere's Fan,' a Period Piece, Bountifully Produced at the Cort.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

The importance of being Mrs. Erlynne was demonstrated last night upon the stage of the Cort in a bountifully produced revival of Oscar Wilde's "Lady Windermere's Fan," a period piece out of the Nineties, and one crowded with asides and epigrams. Homer Curran and his associates have spent their money freely in dressing up the old play to the very limit.

There is still quite a lot of vitality, plus fun, in Wilde's artificial play of artificial people, in his epigrammatic and well-plotted tale of the preservation of the marriage of Lord and Lady Windermere by a ruse on the part of the notorious Mrs. Erlynne, thus saving her daughter from the kind of misstep that wrecked her own life twenty years before.

This new "Lady Windermere's Fan" gets pretty antiquated here and there, particularly in its at-the-ball scene in the second act, but for most of the way it is sprightly fare. Never a play to be given the frequent revivals that have been bestowed upon "The Importance of Being Earnest," and produced in New York only once—and then for a scarcely noticeable engagement—since it was done under Margaret Anglin's able guidance in 1914, "Lady Windermere's Fan" is now played by a generally competent cast. It has been provided with lavish costumes and three fine settings.

Penelope Ward is the Lady Windermere. She is, to my notion, the player who does most for the play. She is quite lovely to look upon, speaks Wilde's dialogue as if it were a habit with her, and she quite wins us all in her distress as she suspects her husband of infidelity. Cornelia Otis Skinner is the revival's Mrs. Erlynne, none other than Lady Windermere's own mother, believed to have been dead for all these years. Miss Skinner, in keeping the great secret, gives a lot of life to the role, but she seems hardly the deadly charmer that Mrs. Erlynne is supposed to be. Henry Daniell, a facile actor hasn't one of his best parts in that of the disturbed Windermere. Many of the evening's epigrams fall to John Buckmaster, playing the dashing Lord Darlington, with whom the anguished Lady Windermere almost fled. There's some gayety from Rex Evans and from Cecil Beaton, who indulges himself in a bit of acting after having designed all the costumes and the elegant scenery. And there is a very amusing performance from Estelle Winwood as the flamboyant and gabbling Duchess of Berwick. She gets the show actually rolling.

The Wilde play, which goes all the way back to the New York stage of the glories of A. M. Palmer and Augustin Daly, is done as Wilde wrote it, with asides and soliloquies retained, and it has been smoothly staged by Jack Minster. The production comes to Broadway from the Coast, with Russell Lewis and Howard Young serving as Homer Curran's associates in sponsorship.

Take "Lady Windermere's Fan" for what it is—a plotty, old-fashioned, artificial play out of the theater of another day—and you will find that it will provide a thoroughly delightful evening.

I liked it, as you've probably guessed by now. There are cheers from this corner for Penelope Ward—and certainly for Cecil Beaton, who just about steals the show from Oscar Wilde.

'LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN.'

Play by Oscar Wilde; staged by Jack Minster; scenery, costumes and lighting by Cecil Beaton; incidental music by Leslie Bridgewater; presented by Homer Curran, in association with Russell Lewis and Howard Young, at the Cort Theater Monday evening, October 14, 1946. The cast:

Lady Windermere	Penelope Ward
Parker	Thomas Louden
Lord Darlington	John Buckmaster
Duchess of Berwick	Estelle Winwood
Lady Agatha Carlisle	Sally Cooper
Lord Windermere	Henry Daniell
Mr. Rufford	Paul Russell
Miss Rufford	Jeri Sauvinet
Lady Paisley	Marguerite Gleason
Hon. Paulette Bonning	Tanagra Thayer
Lady Jedburgh	Elisabeth Valentine
The Bishop	Peter Keyes
Miss Graham	Pamela Wright
Sir James Royston	Jack Merivale
Lady Stutfield	Anne Curson
Mr. Dumby	Evan Thomas
Mrs. Cowper-Cowper	Leonore Elliott
Mr. Hopper	Stanley Bell
Lady Plymdale	Nan Hopkins
Lord Augustus Lorton	Rex Evans
Mr. Cecil Graham	Cecil Beaton
Mrs. Erlynne	Cornelia Otis Skinner
First Footman	Guy Binks
Second Footman	Richard Burns
Rosalie	Marjorie Wood

SYNOPSIS: The action of the play takes place within twenty-four hours, beginning on a Tuesday afternoon at 5:00 o'clock and ending the next day at 1:30 p. m. Act I. Morning-room of Lord Windermere's house in Charlton Terrace, London. Act II. Drawing-room in Lord Windermere's house. That evening. Act III. Lord Darlington's rooms. Directly following. Act IV. Same as Act II. The next morning.

PM

OCTOBER 16, 1946

—Kronenberger—

Silly Doings, Brilliant Talk

PM Reviews

At the Cort Monday night *Lady Windermere's Fan* seemed as good as it ever was—which merely means that it was never an unmixed blessing. What animated it in 1892 still animates it now; and what ails it now ailed it from the beginning. The only difference is that 50 years ago its failings were sufficiently in fashion to be swallowed without a murmur. But in exchange for that—and it's not too bad an exchange—the failings are so out of fashion today that they can be savored with a certain amusement.

Wilde's theater genius really found itself only in that unique and wonderfully ebullient last production, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In the three drawing-room comedies, Wilde not only took any dummy plot that lay to hand, dressing it up in style and letting it speak with wit; he also strayed beyond comedy's true confines, beyond paste situations into mucilaginous sentiment and refined melodramatics. He was a very good craftsman in his period way; but he cared so much less about what his people did than about what they said, he fell back on so many ten-twent-thirt cliches about living while spinning so many effulgent epigrams about Life, that a play like *Lady Windermere* drops, at its worst, from the artificiality it has every right to into silly heroics and sheer bathos.

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But all its guff about Mother Love and The Woman with a Past is nicely overlaid with the glitter of its talk. Here are some of Wilde's most brilliant epigrams, though (as much because they're so hard to deliver as because they're so well-known) it is not the epigrams that come off best on the stage; it is the nonsense and the froufrou. Wilde had a superb knack for chatter, and when somebody like the Duchess of Berwick takes over, the play instantaneously comes to life. He had also a kind of parvenu delight in the great world, which led him to treat it as a subject for style no less than an object of satire.

Today the whole play—being so blatant a period piece—becomes a subject for style, a problem in production. Monday night Cecil Beaton got it off to a good start with his rococo sets (that gave the play great dash if no real elegance) and his truly wonderful costumes. Among the players, the effect was more scrambled. Cornelia Otis Skinner's sincere playing was, most of the time, no way out of the trap of Mrs. Erlynne's highbusted role; and Henry Daniell, though not without manner, seemed to me needlessly chilly. The playing that stood out was Estelle Winwood's robust comic handling of the Duchess, and Penelope Ward's remarkably consistent performance as Lady Windermere. Miss Ward found the right acting style—something that had in it the presence of some one very well born, and the terribly careful poise of some one with the high humorless pride of outraged youth. She could hardly have achieved a real woman, and was wise enough to create a good stage character.

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Whatever their faults, both play and production keep going much of the time and have those moments of special lustre that go only with a period piece. Add to this the virtues of the dialogue and, whatever else you must subtract, there remains a fairly pleasant, even slightly festive, evening.

—Louis Kronenberger

Journal-American

OCTOBER 15, 1946

'Lady Windermere's Fan' Opens at Cort

By ROBERT GARLAND

Our lucky Broadway is privileged now to add another fascinating theatre-piece to its lengthening list of mettlesome revivals. This time it is "Lady Windermere's Fan," brought east from California in a sunkist reproduction of which Oscar Wilde, himself, would certainly have approved. Never, I daresay, in its half-century of survival has the comic tragedy—or the tragic comedy, if you prefer—looked more lovely, sounded more brilliant or told its story with more actorial cunning.

When, in 1891, Oscar Wilde delivered the completed manuscript of "Lady Windermere's Fan" to actor-manager George Alexander, he called it "one of those modern drawing-room plays with pink lampshades." Which, to this day, it remains. And, in the sunkist reproduction which has come into the Cort, Homer Curran, in association with Russell Lewis and Howard Young, has held it well within its late-Victorian boundaries. Last night's fascinating theatre-piece is everything it could be.

Of course, it is artificial. Of course, it is devious. Of course, it is perverse. But it is theatre through and through. And, by holding it well within its late-Victorian boundaries, our visiting showmen from the Golden West have been wise in their day and generation. Any attempt at modernization would be the play's undoing. In this year, 1946, nobody would give a darn what poor dear Lady Windermere left behind in poor dear Lord Darlington's chambers.

Which is what Tallulah Bankhead insisted when, not long ago, I suggested that she exhume the comic-tragedy and display herself in the showy shoes of Mrs. Erlynne. Or, if she so desired, of the Duchess of Berwick.

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Looking Backward

The miracle is that, in the playhouse in 48th st., everybody cares tremendously about the fan poor dear Lady Windermere leaves behind in poor dear Lord Darlington's chamber. They care, you care, and I care, because the tale of its misplacement is retold as artificially, as deviously and as perversely as was from the first intended. Under the direction of Jack Minster, against the decor of Cecil Beaton, above the music of Leslie Bridgewater, Oscar Wilde remains in Queen Victoria's London.

There, and then, that poor dear Lord Darlington plays upon that poor dear Lady Windermere's suspicions while, as he does so, poor dear Lord Windermere plays, all unconsciously, into the titled villain's hands. Until the climax of the second stanza, the one taking place in Lord Windermere's drawing-room, no one is supposed to know that the contriving Mrs. Erlynne, the goddess out of the Mayfairy machine, is, when not contriving, the doting parent of the lady with the fan.

That is all there is. There is no more plot, that is to say. But there is a plentitude of Oscar-Wilde-ian epigram, that topsy-turvy trick of changing white into black, fact into fiction, right into wrong. In the mettlesome revival footlighted at the Cort, it is as if two plays were in progress at the same time. One a tragedy, dated but alive. The other a comedy, alive but dated. What brings them into focus is the rightness with which they are recovered, reunited and artfully reproduced.

In their current resuscitation, Homer Curran and his associates are not concerned with making a modern out of Lady Windermere and her precious fan. Instead, they do their best to make a Victorian out of you.

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As Oscar Said—

They succeeded for the most part with last night's audience, for when we professional aisle-sitters hurried away to our respective journals, the curtain at the Cort was rising and falling to the accompaniment of bravos and less articulate acclamation. Estelle Winwood had acted off with the more obvious honors, while Penelope Ward had followed her example. These, and John Buckmaster, Sally Cooper, Stanley Bell, Red Evans and the unstarred others, were bowing obediently to the applauding congregation.

Cornelia Otis Skinner, co-starred with Henry Daniell, was somewhat slow in getting into the proper mood. But, following a second act decidedly off-key, she finished the remaining two with fine effect and feeling. But it was Cecil Beaton who leaped into four-fold appreciation with his costumes, his scenery, his lighting and his green-carnationed Mr. Graham. He, more than any one, made of "Lady Windermere's Fan," a rare enchantment, a Victorian valentine for every year-round evening.

Following the final curtain of the first production of last night's revival—St. James's Theatre, London, Feb. 20, 1892—Oscar Wilde came before the curtain. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I have enjoyed this evening immensely. The actors have given a charming rendition of a delightful play, and your appreciation has been most intelligent. I congratulate you on the success of your performance, which persuades me that you think almost as highly of my play as I do myself"...

Had Oscar Wilde been alive last night, he could have come before the curtain at the Cort and repeated his speech verbatim. Once again there was a charming rendition of a delightful play, and, on each side of the footlights, the performance was successful.

New York Post

OCTOBER 15, 1946

Oscar Wilde's Old Comedy Retains Its Gay Spirit

By Richard Watts Jr.

There is something particularly winning about the world of Oscar Wilde's plays, something beyond their considerable merits as gay and ingratiating comedies. It lies, I think, in the amiably paradoxical ethical code that the playwright devised for the inhabitants of his theatrical universe. His characters, all of them handsome, witty and phenomenally charming, talk with gracefully epigrammatic cynicism about faith and morals while invariably conducting themselves in the most scrupulously blameless romantic fashion.

Their passions are never too violent for comfort. Their self-sacrifice is splendid but never painful. Their conversation is scornful of convention but their behavior never fails in nobility and grace. Their sins are harmless and their virtues graceful and without smugness. They have discovered the finest way conceivable of laughing at virtue and holding on to it without pain, embarrassment or hypocrisy. They even have a certain democracy of their own in that all belong to a world where every man is dashing and humorously eloquent and every woman is beautiful and well-bred.

When this graceful Wildean world, which is always present in the text of his comedies, can also be captured in the production and acting, the result is certain to be gay, charming and spirited. The new production of "Lady Windermere's Fan," which arrived here last night, is pleasantly successful in creating the style and mood befitting such a work, and the result is another delightful addition to a season which is rapidly becoming something to talk about.

Gielgud's Wilde

During the fall of 1942 in London I saw a production of "The Importance of Being Earnest," staged and acted by John Gielgud, and it was one of the most completely satisfying things I have ever seen in the theatre. The current version of "Lady Windermere's Fan" is by no means that fine, but, for that matter, the play is not as good, either, "The Importance of Being Earnest" being among the classic comedies of the English-speaking stage, while, by comparison, "Lady Windermere's Fan" is virtually commonplace.

Nevertheless, it does possess the qualities of its author's works to a rewarding degree. Basically, it is just another story of the sacrificial mother, the disreputable and scorned lady of dubious virtue who saves her daughter's honor without revealing her identity to the child who thinks her parent dead instead of disgraced. But it is that old story with a difference, because the wit, charm, grace and style that are Oscar Wilde in the theatre are always present. By now, of course, the most famous of the Wilde epigrams have lost some of their luster but there is still an engaging humor and wisdom about them.

Many factors have contributed to the success of the new production in achieving the proper mood, but first credit must go to the perverse, peregrinating and versatile Cecil Beaton, whose settings and costumes are not only colorful and generally admirable in themselves but capture the spirit of the preceedings brilliantly. Mr. Beaton also plays a role and, while he is hardly an expert actor, he again captures the spirit of the occasion wonderfully.

Miss Ward's Success

The playing is generally excellent, but, with all due credit to the other players, honors go to Penelope Ward, who not only looks enchanting in the Beaton costumes but acts with a lovely combination of sincerity, style and humor. Miss Ward, who hasn't been seen on the American stage since "French Without Tears," is a most welcome addition to any dramatic season.

Cornelia Otis Skinner plays the sacrificial Mrs. Erlynne with an excellent sense of both the comic and dramatic aspects of her role. John Buckmaster is effective as Lord Darlington, Henry Daniell is admirably in character as Lord Windemere and Rex Evans is helpful as Lord Augustus. Estelle Winwood is a delight, Jack Minster, a director unknown to me, has staged the work excellently.

In our chaotic day, an Oscar Wilde comedy, with its charming artificiality, is particularly welcome, and "Lady Windermere's Fan" should be a comfort to all of us.

New York World-Telegram

OCTOBER 15, 1946

'Lady Windermere's Fan' Revived In Colorful Production at the Cort

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

A spectacularly beautiful production opened last night in the revival of "Lady Windermere's Fan." The color in which Cecil Beaton has set the play makes it an artificial fiesta worth watching.

The 55 years since Wilde wrote the play have not dimmed the wit of his lines, except in so far as they have been quoted and paraphrased. Even the familiar quips, so neatly turned, give out a brittle report when heard in their original situations.

The setting and some tasteful performances frame the characters' attitudes so tactfully that it is often easy to forget how dated the basic plot is.

The Fallen Woman.

It sounds trite to say that this is the story of a fallen woman. Mrs. Erlynne is just that. She is perfectly willing to take advantage of the rich marriage of the daughter she long ago deserted. But she is just as willing to ruin her own reputation all over again to save the daughter, who does not know her, from following in her path.

Wilde's comments on morality are wittier and a good deal more graceful than those of playwrights who have written since about elegant infidelity.

In the first act there is a good deal of gallantry which seems nonsensical, but it sets a mood for what follows.

When the Duchess of Berwick brings to Lady Windermere the gossip about Lord Windermere supporting the notorious Mrs. Erlynne the plot gets spinning.

Fragile Sincerity.

Estelle Winwood gave a knowing and superb picture of the tattletale Duchess. Here, too, Penelope Ward establishes a figure of fragile sincerity as Lady Windermere, which gives the whole play a thread of sympathy. She is lovely looking and acts with a delicacy that never wavers.

Cornelia Otis Skinner, who is starred as Mrs. Erlynne, is an imposing, handsome figure as she makes her first impertinent entrance at the Windermere's second-act party.

It is not until the third act that her role takes on intensity and dimension as she begs her daughter not to throw away her life because of an imagined injury done by her husband.

Miss Skinner grows deeply touching in the final scene. Here she patches up the trouble she has caused, in double talk with the daughter who must not discover who she is. Miss Skinner is brittle, adoring and forlorn.

Preserves Mood of Artifice.

Co-starred with her is Henry Daniell in the rather negative role of Lord Windermere. He preserves the mood of artifice while resisting what must be temptations to be melodramatic.

John Buckmaster is elegant and sincere as the Lord Darlington who makes his bid for Lady Windermere when she doubts her husband's love. Rex Evans makes a pleasing swain to be hoodwinked again and again by the clever Mrs. Erlynne.

In smaller parts, Evan Thomas is dry and precise with his share of the Wilde quips, and Stanley Bell makes a fresh bit of the suitor for the Duchess' daughter.

Mr. Beaton himself appears as an effete crony of the principal blades, and garners several lusty laughs.

Decked Out Like a Wedding Cake.

The habit of first night audiences of applauding every new scene on which a curtain rises was never more justified than it is here. "Lady Windermere" is like a fantastic wedding cake.

There are walls of gold brocade and off-stage colonnades. There are gowns that make your mouth water. Miss Winwood moves from a mustard-colored outfit with a pot of ferns on her head, to lavender and diamonds. Miss Ward is dazzling in a gold ballgown and a turquoise cape that would cover Central Park.

Miss Skinner comes on the scene in white satin, black velvet and mammoth pearls. She moves off in a pink gauze affair that looks like spun sugar candy.

It is all just about the most spectacular thing to look at since "Jumbo."